

With complete disregard for irony, Conservatives are sometimes triggered laughably easily.

When the brown folks [forget their station](#) , for example. When we ladies get *too ballsy*. And God forbid if anyone dares fuck with the fairytales.

A couple of weeks ago a brouhaha centred on [teaching media literacy through fairytales](#) . Apparently any attempt to teach children to critically think about our culture's parade of pretty-and-pitiful princesses is just feminism run amok. No one, of course, was actually advocating for the abolition of these stories but, predictably, Conservatives - fervent in their opposition to anything that looks like change or smells like independent thinking - packaged the story as political correctness gone awry.

Again

This week and a new incarnation of the untouchable topic of children's reading lists has reared its head, this time coupled with that well-established boogeyman: trigger warnings. Once again, the (albeit very complicated) challenge of managing risk in secondary schools has become another story of those special snowflakes birthed by leftie educators.

I've written about trigger warnings quite a bit ([here](#) and [here](#) , for example), and participated in extensive media commentary about them (see

[this](#)

or

[that](#)

). In brief, I think that while they are often well-intentioned that frequently they lead to unintended, and sometimes completely unpleasant consequences.

This week the story is rooted in a debate over whether the novels assigned to VCE students [should come with content warnings](#)

. Some assigned books, apparently, are a tad depressing.

I won't go so far as to claim that trigger warnings have become trendy, but they've certainly

become the default response of education institutions who want to both demonstrate compassion and to avoid litigation.

With universities widely implementing these warnings, it's no surprise that the flow-on effect is other education settings musing on their merit. Hence the debate on whether they are necessary in the secondary school English classroom.

One of my central concerns with trigger warnings is the absence of an evidence base demonstrating efficacy. Where is the research that documents the trauma experienced by students at the hands of educators teaching controversial content? Where, equally, is the proof that students who are forewarned about such material fare better? Where is the nuanced discussion about the true complexity of triggers? Where is the acknowledgement that simply saying the word rape, or reading a story about a harmful culture practice is no more likely to revictimise than certain smells or songs or weather?

Another concern relates to my worry that we have become a culture scared of emotions. Is there anything more powerful than being moved by a book, by a film? Do we not in fact, *praise* media that can bring us to tears, to fear, to states of arousal? Why then, are we so frightened about young people feeling things when they read? When they sit in a classroom? Why have we decided that students are best off being *warned* about the possibility of emoting? Why are we so hesitant to acknowledge that - shock horror - having emotions is a pretty good clue that we're *alive*?

Reading, writing, arithmetic, sure, but one far more important skill is learning how to think. Every semester I tell my students that I have no interest in teaching them *what* to think, but *how* to do so. If we were all taught media literacy - if our culture truly valued critical thinking - I dare say the term "fake news" would have made much less of a cultural dent.

Schools equally need to cultivate an interest in encouraging resilience. That students can read a book, that they can have a cry - that they can, occasionally, feel like they want to roll into the foetal position and have a good hard sob - but that *this too shall pass*. That no single emotion is the be all and end all.

Trigger Warnings, Evidence-Based Policy and Media Literacy

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I don't actually have a problem with students being told in advance that a novel covers challenging material. Truth be told, I think in the current political climate doing so is unavoidable. That said, is *challenging material* not the very reason that the book was assigned in the first place? Is not learning how to think about challenging material the very reason for the classroom?

I'm unquestionably concerned about classroom snowflakes. But I have far greater concerns about a culture that has become so incredibly uncomfortable with emotion - and so ready to buy into risk-anxieties - despite the paucity of evidence.

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Read more <http://theconversation.com/trigger-warnings-evidence-based-policy-and-media-literacy-76856>